

LESBIANTIQUITY

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ANAKREON

**...FOR SHE'S FROM
WELL-BUILT
LESBOS...**

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Anakreon translation, introduction, and notes © Rioghnach Sachs 2024

Greek text from: D. A. Campbell, ed., *Greek Lyric, Volume II: Anacreon, Anacreontea, Choral Lyric from Olympus to Alcman* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988)

Back cover art: 'A Fancy-Sandalled Girl' © Emily Setzer 2024

THE TRANSLATOR

Dr Rioghnach Sachs

I have recently completed my PhD at King's College London, funded by the London Arts and Humanities Partnership. My thesis sought to further illuminate the special contribution of Sappho's poetry to the history of sexuality, spanning classics, classical reception, queer studies and comparative literature. In particular, I focused on the (often under-estimated) role of gendered indeterminacy in Sappho's poetry, and its consequences for how readers interpret gender and sexuality while reading it. Outside of academia, I do a lot of music: I sing with the Fourth Choir, the Orlando Singers, and St Peter's Church Hammersmith.



ἼΑΝΑΚΡΕΩΝ Ὀ ΤΗΙΟΣ

Anakreon (or Anacreon) lived in the sixth century BCE. He was originally from Teos, but he moved around. After Teos was conquered by the Persians, he (with the other Teians) left for Abdera in Thrace; he also spent time in Samos and Athens. He wrote in a range of genres, including elegiac and iambic poetry, spanning many topics, including war, politics, and conventional wisdom. But most of his surviving lyric poetry fits his 'reputation as an easy-going poet of love and wine', covering especially the erotic and convivial themes appropriate for symposia (elite drinking parties), where they would have been sung.¹ Short and humorous, song 358 is typical of this type of song, making a joke out of the narrator's sexual rejection by a Lesbian girl.

Despite its brevity, this playful poem illuminates how female-female desire was thought about and referred to at symposia in antiquity: apparently ambiguously, playfully, and by a clever allusion to Sappho (as the following discussion demonstrates). Critics have understood Anakreon 358 as alluding to Sappho since antiquity. Athenaios, who quotes the poem and thus preserves it for posterity,² writes: 'Chamaeleon in his treatise *On Sappho* actually declares that some say it was to her [Sappho] that the following lines were addressed by Anacreon (fr. 358)...'.³ The idea that Anakreon responds poetically to Sappho is helpful for interpreting the poem's joke. From the perspective of Anakreon's (presumably) male narrator,⁴ the reason the 'fancy-sandalled' girl rejects him is because she is from Lesbos, as indicated by the explanatory particle γὰρ, 'for' (line 5). However, exactly why her Lesbian heritage moves her to spurn him is left provocatively ambiguous.

¹ The information hitherto is from Budelmann (2018) pp. 188–9; quotation: p. 189.

² Athenaios 13.599c–d; Budelmann (2018) p. 193. Athenaios lived in the third century CE.

³ Campbell (1988) pp. 56–7 [my insertion].

⁴ See Boehringer (2021) pp. 43–4.

In spurning Anakreon, the Lesbian girl gapes ‘at another [f]’ – but who or what does she gape at? Should the antecedent of πρὸς δ’ ἄλλην τινὰ, ‘towards another [f]’ (line 8), be interpreted as ἡ, ‘she [f]’ (line 4), or τὴν μὲν ἐμὴν κόμην, ‘my hair [f]’ (line 5)? If the former, she rejects him because she prefers ‘some other (girl) [f]’; but if the latter, she rejects him because she prefers ‘some other (hair) [f]’. Each possibility, in turn, rests on the ambiguous reputation of Lesbian girls and their predilections. Reading the line as describing a Lesbian girl lusting after another girl would recall the homoerotic poetry of the Lesbian Sappho, whose fame could plausibly have coloured how the rest of Greece saw girls from Lesbos.⁵ Equally, her gaping after another’s hair may simply imply that she prefers a more attractive crop of hair, perhaps even χρυσοκόμης Ἔρως, ‘golden-haired Eros’ (line 2), himself, over the narrator’s white hair.⁶ This could hint at the long-established reputation of Lesbian girls as beautiful,⁷ and therefore spoilt for their choice of partner. If taken in conjunction with the (perhaps surprising) meaning of λεσβιάζειν

⁵ Classical authors after Anakreon mostly associated Lesbos with fellatio, but not female-female desire (Boehrer 2021 pp. 46–8). On this basis, Anakreon’s association of Lesbos with female homoeroticism may have seemed unusual at the time he wrote, in that it did not reflect the island’s most obvious erotic connotation (see Pelliccia 1995 p. 33 n. 26; Boehrer 2021 p. 48); he could even have been creating a new stereotype about girls from Lesbos (Pelliccia *ibid.*). Even so, Anakreon’s audience would have appreciated a connection between Lesbos and female homoeroticism, when taken as an allusion to Sappho’s well-known homoerotic poetry, composed on Lesbos in the Lesbian dialect: Marcovich (1983) p. 374; Pelliccia (1995) pp. 32–3; Budelmann (2018) p. 195; Boehrer (2021) p. 49; Mueller (2021) p. 39.

⁶ Woodbury (1979) p. 286.

⁷ In the phrase εὐκτίτου Λέσβου (358.6–7, ‘well-built Lesbos’), Anakreon alludes to Homer’s *Iliad* 9.128–30, where Lesbos is likewise described as well-built (*Iliad* 9.129, Λέσβον ἑκτιμένην), and Lesbian women are described as surpassing the tribes of women in beauty; thus, Anakreon tacitly evokes this Homeric certification of Lesbian women’s beauty: Woodbury (1979) p. 282; Pfeijffer (2000) pp. 178–9; Gilhuly (2015) pp. 160–1, see also p. 149; Budelmann (2018) p. 195.

as 'to fellate',⁸ it has also been argued that this last line could hint that, as a Lesbian, she would prefer to fellate someone younger than the white-haired narrator; that is, perhaps she 'stands open-mouthed', more precisely, before another's pubic hair.⁹

Although some scholars have argued in favour of one reading or the other, attempting to resolve this ambiguity,¹⁰ the richest readings underline that a deliberate ambiguity seems to be precisely the poem's point.¹¹ As Boehringer points out, Anakreon is likely playing on the verbal similarity between κόμην, 'hair' (line 5), and κόρην, 'girl' (implied), by making each possibility a viable antecedent for ἄλλην τινά.¹² Taking this ambiguity as deliberate, then, gives the fullest account of Anakreon's ingenuity, since it stresses the power of the poem's punchline, making the poem funnier and more titillating: the narrator's hapless tale of rejection is maximally self-deprecating, and the Lesbian girl maximally mysterious and alluring, when she could have rejected him for any of the three possible reasons.

In turn, Anakreon's evocation of female homoeroticism, by reference to Lesbos, suggests that Sappho's poetry was so distinctive that it could plausibly bestow a reputation for 'liking other girls' onto girls from her native island in particular. At the same time, the poem's

⁸ N.B. The literal meaning of λεσβιάζειν is 'to do what people from Lesbos do'. For discussion of the 'fellatio' meaning, see, e.g., Goldhill (1987) p. 16; Gentili (1988) p. 95; Boehringer (2021) p. 47. See also Gilhuly (2015), especially pp. 147–9, who considers both this and other possible meanings of λεσβιάζειν, erotic and musical.

⁹ Gentili (1988) p. 96.

¹⁰ Gentili (1988) pp. 95–6; Hutchinson (2001) p. 276; Marcovich (1983) p. 374; Pfeijffer (2000) pp. 165, 171–84.

¹¹ Goldhill (1987) pp. 17–18; Boehringer (2021) pp. 45–51; see also Pelliccia (1995) pp. 33–4.

¹² Boehringer (2021) p. 49.

humour suggests that this reputation was benign. Although it would have been funny for a man to be rejected for another girl, the ambiguity of the punchline suggests that it was equally funny for him to be rejected in favour of another's superior hairstyle, or offer of fellatio; in other words, distinctive though it may have been, female-female desire was just one erotic option for the Lesbian girl among others, not especially remarkable or contemptible – but rather, perfectly compatible with her being attractive.¹³

Further underlining the ingenuity of Anakreon's poem, the very ambiguity of his allusion to Sappho seems to emulate Sappho's unique poetics, which made her depiction of homoeroticism so distinctive and memorable.¹⁴ It is notable that Anakreon uses strikingly similar techniques here to Sappho. Just as Anakreon delays his punchline until the end of his poem, and just as he creates a deliberate, provocative ambiguity surrounding whether the narrative involves female homoeroticism or not, so too does Sappho, in her two most famous homoerotic poems. Consider Sappho's fragment 31, which creates what Bär calls a 'surprise effect'.¹⁵ The poem delays revealing that Sappho's narrator is female until the clarifying feminine grammar appears at 31.14, before which point it is ambiguous whether the narrator's desire for a female beloved is homoerotic or not. A similar 'surprise effect' occurs in Sappho fragment 1, where it is unclear that the narrator is female until the speaker is named as Sappho at 1.20, and the beloved is likewise not revealed to be female until 1.24. Given that Sappho playfully delays telling the reader that each poem is homoerotic, 'in a manner so devious that it appears

¹³ Boehringer (2021) p. 51.

¹⁴ I have recently argued that Anakreon 358 imitates Sappho's playful poetic style: Sachs (2022) pp. 98–100.

¹⁵ Bär (2019) p. 6.

teasing',¹⁶ and given also Anakreon's close engagement with Sappho's poetic language in other ways,¹⁷ it seems likely that Anakreon's allusion cleverly evokes both Sappho's erotics and poetics at once.

Thus, Anakreon 358 illuminates 'lesbiantiquity' further, suggesting via its allusion that Sappho's homoeroticism was distinctive and recognisable not only in itself, but also by virtue of how Sappho expressed it, through playful poetic delays and ambiguity.

¹⁶ DeJean (1989) p. 20.

¹⁷ See Gilhuly (2015) p. 161, who points out how Anakreon recalls Sappho's frequent use of *δηῦτε* at 358.1 (see also Budelmann (2018) p. 194), and her use of *ποικιλο-* (Sappho 1.1) at 358.3, in *ποικιλοσαμβάλω*; see also Boehringer (2021) pp. 49–50, who elaborates on p. 49 that Anakreon noticeably echoes Sappho's Aeolic dialect, by using *ποικιλοσαμβάλω* instead of the Ionic *ποικιλοσανδάλω*.

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ROOT & BRANCH READING GUIDE

Our translations branch out to explore

a variety of options for the text:

any variants in the original < ^{Greek}
Latin > texts
and the various possible meanings in English.

Our translations are rooted in the words
of the original text, replicating when possible

word order, root meanings of words, and
grammatical gender $\left(\begin{array}{c} [n] \\ [f] \\ [m] \end{array} \right)$ of words about people.

You, the reader, will choose which branches you prefer to follow.

<With a
A> ball – yet again! – <dark red
purple>
 <striking
throwing at> me, golden-haired Eros
 with a fancy-sandalled <young girl
woman>
 <challenges me
calls me forward> to play.

- 5 But she – for she's from well-built
 Lesbos – with my hair [f]
 (for it's white) finds great fault,
 And towards another [f] <gapes
yawns> !



- σφαίρη δηῦτέ με πορφυρῇ
 βάλλων χρυσοκόμης Ἔρωσ
 νήνι ποικιλοσαμβάλῳ
 συμπαίζειν προκαλεῖται·
 5 ἢ δ', ἐστὶν γὰρ ἀπ' εὐκτίτου
 Λέσβου, τὴν μὲν ἐμὴν κόμην,
 λευκὴ γάρ, καταμέμφεται,
 πρὸς δ' ἄλλην τινὰ χάσκει.

NOTES

1 *yet again*: δηῦτέ is a word used frequently by Sappho in erotic contexts.

3 *νήνι*: the Ionic form of νεάνιδι, the dative of νεάνις, 'girl', 'young woman' (Budelmann 2018 p. 194).

3 *ποικιλοσαμβάλω*: although Anakreon generally uses Ionic dialect (see my note above), he deviates from this here, using the Aeolic dialect for 'fancy-sandalled' (rather than the Ionic form, ποικιλοσανδάλω: Boehringer 2021 p. 49). This shift into the dialect of the Lesbian poets, Sappho and Alkaios, emphasises the Lesbian girl's island of origin, as well as its 'glorious reputation' in having produced these poets (Boehringer 2021 p. 50). For the Sapphic significance of ποικιλο-, 'fancy-', see my introduction (p. 5 n. 17).

4 *to play*: as in English, συμπαίζειν, 'to play with', could have erotic undertones, alongside its sporting ones (Budelmann 2018 p. 194: e.g. Anakreon 417.5).

5 *well-built*: εὐκτίτου = εὐκτίμενος (Liddell & Scott 1994 p. 327). See also my introduction (p. 2 n. 7).

5–8 These lines have multiple possible meanings; see my introduction (pp. 2–3).



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